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PROGRAM ABC World News Tonight STATION WJLA-TV
ABC Network

DATE November 4, 1985 7:00 P.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Vitaly Yurchenko

PETER JENNINGS: There has not been anything like it in modern espionage. A Soviet KGB agent who we were told had defected to the United States this summer suddenly appeared before reporters at the Soviet Embassy in Washington this evening and said he hadn't defected, he'd been kidnaped; moreover, that he had now escaped.

And Vitaly Yurchenko was not described originally as an ordinary KGB agent, but the number five man in the whole KGB.

The American intelligence community is shocked. It is a major shock to Soviet-American relations, just two weeks before Mr. Reagan and Mr. Gorbachev meet in Geneva.

We begin in Washington with ABC's Jack Smith.

JACK SMITH: Yurchenko's defection to the U.S. this summer was hailed as the U.S. intelligence coup of all time. But there he was today, no longer in U.S. hands, but in the Soviet Embassy at a hastily called news conference, claiming his defection to the U.S. had actually been a kidnapping.

TRANSLATOR: I was forcibly abducted in Rome by some unknown persons. Unconscious, I was brought from Italy to the USA.

After Yurchenko's statement, reporters were then free to ask questions.

REPORTER: Mr. Yurchenko, are we to believe that in the three months that you were in the hands of the American intelligence authorities that you did not in any way provide secret

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information of Soviet intelligence and other activities?

TRANSLATOR: He did not.

In the period in which I was conscious and controlled my behavior, I'd have not passed any secret information.

SMITH: Yurchenko claimed that his CIA interrogators had tortured him.

VITALY YURCHENKO: Mr. Charlie, Charlie. His name -- that's his code name, one of his code names, Charlie. But he was my main torturer. He hate, it seems to me, people of humanity, because he is, it seems to me, psychologically sick person.

SMITH: Yurchenko recalled a meeting with CIA Director William Casey, but said he had been drugged.

TRANSLATOR: In certain intervals they were giving me drugs. And they gave me drugs also several hours before that meeting with Mr. Casey, but a lesser amount of drugs than was usual. So I do remember that meeting, but everything seems to have happened as if in a fog.

SMITH: Yurchenko's version of his defection is severely at variance with what Washington says really happened. It was this summer, here at the Vatican Museum in Rome, that Yurchenko met U.S. agents and agreed to defect. He was a deputy director of the Soviet KGB and his information was said to be highly damaging to Moscow. When last heard of, he was reportedly being debriefed by the CIA and had exposed scores of Soviet secret operations and spies. It's believed, for instance, Yurchenko fingered Edward Howard, a former CIA officer who fled his home in New Mexico two months ago and is still being sought for suspicion of turning over highly sensitive information about CIA methods to the Soviets.

Just why Yurchenko decided to go back to Moscow is not yet clear, but it's believed to have been voluntary. According to U.S. officials, he simply slipped away from this CIA guards this weekend and vanished, turning up at the Soviet Embassy tonight.

JENNINGS: Joining us tonight from Washington is the Vice Chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Senator Patrick Leahy.

Senator, are you as shocked as the rest of us, or did you know all this?

SENATOR PATRICK LEAHY: No. I was as shocked as

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everybody else. In fact, when I first heard about it I thought it sounded like something out of a second-rate mystery novel where somebody got the pages all scrambled up.

JENNINGS: Well, I assume you've been checking. Did we kidnap him? Did we torture him?

SENATOR LEAHY: No. No, of course not. And it's not the way that we get defectors. And maybe other countries do, and perhaps the Soviet Union does, but we do not do that, and did not do it in this case.

We have one of two things. Either he's trying to make up a story to get back into the good graces of the people he's with, or he was a double agent all along. I think I'd find it awfully hard for somebody who'd been a willing KGB agent to come over and talk to us at great length and go back and expect to get the Order of Lenin. He may get the Order of Lubyanka prison, but not the Order of Lenin.

JENNINGS: He says he escaped from a safehouse. Do you know how?

SENATOR LEAHY: I think he just -- he came to the United States voluntarily and he left voluntarily. Whether he walked away or however, he was able to do it voluntarily. I'm not sure what motivates him to say what he's doing now. It's obviously one of two things. Either he wants to ingratiate himself with people to get back into the Soviet Union. Or, what would be even worse, he was a double agent all along.

JENNINGS: Senator, there's one story around that he had a girlfriend in Canada, that he discovered that she loved him as a KGB agent but not as a defector.

SENATOR LEAHY: Well, I've heard stories, stories like that. While love might motivate strange things, I think it would take more than that to motivate what's happened here. Because he puts himself at enormous personal risk unless it was something planned by the Soviets all along.

JENNINGS: A major embarrassment to the United States, though, isn't it?

SENATOR LEAHY: I think it will be played that way. Certainly the Soviets, having a press conference like this, will ballyhoo this around the world. And there will be parts of the world that believe that we really would drug somebody and kidnap them and hold them all this time.

JENNINGS: And you'll investigate fully?

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SENATOR LEAHY: We will, of course. But so will the Administration.

JENNINGS: Senator, Senator Leahy, thank you very much for joining us.